

Wang, R. (2023). How a Chinese social media platform recontextualises Russian strategic narratives: A case study in news translation. *The Journal of Specialised Translation*, 40, 188-212.  
<https://doi.org/10.26034/cm.jostrans.2023.530>

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## **How a Chinese social media platform recontextualises Russian strategic narratives: A case study in news translation**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The free circulation of online videos across platforms, languages and cultures due to their low-cost and easy-to-produce characteristics allows participatory media agents (Jenkins 2004) to reuse and repurpose ready videos for their own political and commercial aims. This paper explores this understudied phenomenon through a case study of news videos which were originally produced by a Russian international broadcaster for YouTube but were later recontextualised by a Chinese state-aligned media agent, The Observer, for Bilibili. Using a contrastive analysis, this paper examines the translation strategies that the video uploader adopted in its appropriation of the source videos for Bilibili users. This paper also examines how the uploader's edits, like the selection of videos, contribute to changes to the Russian strategic narratives (Miskimmon *et al.* 2013, 2017) in the target context. The data analysis demonstrates that by adopting suitable editing techniques the Chinese media agent has significantly changed the Russian strategic narratives to serve its own political and market agendas. As part of its translation process for the target media context, the uploader has taken various factors into account, such as the Bilibili audiences' consumption habits, their entertainment needs, their pre-existing stereotypes of Putin, Russia and China, and its own propaganda missions.

### **KEYWORDS**

Recontextualisation, news translation, video platforms, YouTube, Bilibili, RT, strategic narrative.

## **1. Introduction**

Videos on various social platforms are a popular source of global news. Video-sharing platforms like YouTube serve as a means of circulating political content and have become a common political communication tool, preferred by professional media outlets and political campaigners in many countries. However, given the increasingly interconnected global media system, there is a tendency for such news videos to be 'incidentally' disseminated from one platform to another, across languages and cultures, via a combination of participatory agents ranging from news organisations, the political elite, amateur and professional bloggers, to active netizens. These videos can be appropriated, repurposed and recirculated (Jenkins 2004) for political, commercial or aesthetic purposes. Such a phenomenon is pervasive on the internet due to the low-cost and easy-to-repurpose qualities of online videos, with translation playing a central role in the global flow of news videos.

The reuse of existing videos, including news videos, is not a new topic in audiovisual translation studies. Numerous previous studies are, however, mainly concerned with the interventionist engagement of communities who have penetrated the global media market as a means of resistance against the top-down distribution of information (Pérez-González 2013), such as

fan translations (e.g., Díaz-Cintas and Muñoz 2006; Dwyer 2012; O'Hagan 2009) and activist translations (e.g., Baker 2016; Pérez-González 2010). Scholarly attention has rarely been drawn to the audiovisual translation practices of professional media agents, especially those allied to the governments, in presenting news across different video platforms.

In the related field of news translation studies, scholars (e.g., Bassnett 2005; Bielsa 2007; Bielsa and Bassnett 2009; Conway 2011; Davier 2014; Valdeón 2015) have examined a number of aspects, such as the translation practices of global news agencies, the integration of translation with journalistic works, the visibility of translation in news and the strategies adopted in translation processes since the mid-2000s when news translation emerged as the object of systematic study (Conway and Davier 2019). Various terms have been used to describe this specialised form of translation, including "gatekeeping" (Vuorinen 1997; Xia 2019), "rewriting" (Bielsa and Bassnett 2009), "transframing" (Liu 2018), "transediting" (Schäffner 2012; Stetting 1989; Valdeón 2015) and "localisation" (Orengo 2005). These terms capture the complexity of news translation, which includes a significant degree of manipulation of the source text to accommodate the target context. The majority of this research has studied the translation of print media, whereas audiovisual news translation has been addressed less frequently (Tsai 2018). Moreover, despite a small but growing number of studies on translation practices on social media platforms (e.g., Desjardins 2017, 2019; Hernández 2020), the translation of news content in digital social settings remains a relatively under-investigated area. For example, although Welbers and Opgenhaffen (2019) compared five Dutch newspapers' coverage of immigration on their respective websites and Facebook pages, the analysis focused on written rather than audiovisual texts.

Accordingly, this study aims to explore an understudied area of audio-visual and news translation: the translation of news videos on video-sharing platforms by professional media agents with state-aligned affiliations. This emerging trend is analysed via a case study of Russian videos originally produced by RT (formerly Russia Today) for YouTube but later translated and reuploaded on Bilibili by a Beijing-aligned Chinese media agent — The Observer<sup>1</sup>. RT and The Observer are professional media agents allied to their respective Russian and Chinese governments and are often accused of imposing strict control over their media environments. This study emphasises the media context's important role in shaping the Chinese uploader's translation of the source videos on the target platform and the political implication of such mediation. This study also sheds light on factors within the target media context that influence the choices and strategies of the translators.

## **2. A case study of RT videos translated from YouTube to Bilibili**

RT is a generously funded, well-staffed global network of multilingual television channels that is sponsored by the Kremlin (Elswah and Howard 2020). RT provides news content, which is facilitated by extensive integration with social media sites such as YouTube (Jaitner and Mattsson 2015). RT is a vital tool in Russian soft power and public diplomacy (Yablokov 2015) and disseminates the Kremlin's strategic narratives (Miskimmon *et al.* 2013, 2017). RT's content has been described as aiming to "justify Russian government policies" (Yablokov 2015: 312) and "disturb the hegemonic balance of power" (Hutchings *et al.* 2015: 641). Russia deliberately promotes ideologised political messages in accordance with entertainment logic (Tolz and Teper 2018).

In Western countries, this news network has predominantly been perceived as an instrument of Russian propaganda or disinformation efforts (Makhashvili 2017) that are used to counter what Russian political leadership and media outlets have claimed are 'Russophobic' Western attitudes and misrepresentations of the country. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has been on-going since the 24th of February 2022, RT was banned from broadcasting across all channels in Western countries such as the US and the UK, including YouTube and Facebook, due to RT's systematic disinformation about the war.

Before being banned, RT attached great importance to YouTube in the distribution of its political content to a wider audience. This multilingual service used to run a range of regional YouTube channels such as RT America and RT Russia. Although RT's web traffic has been artificially inflated (Crilley *et al.* 2022; Yatsyk 2022), it has attracted a larger following online than it has on television (Al-Rawi 2017), and it claims to have one of the highest YouTube viewership rates for a news channel (Elswah and Howard 2020). Crilley *et al.* (2022: 223) believe that "RT's greatest success has been on social media, particularly YouTube, where RT was the first news channel to reach over a billion views."

As stated earlier, the RT YouTube videos are available to be downloaded and reused by other media agents, including The Observer. The Observer is a Chinese online media outlet which exclusively targets Chinese internet users and actively participates in the rapid exchange of virtual information. The Observer has established a network of digital news services, including an official news website (guancha.cn) and official channels on social platforms such as Bilibili. On the 'About Us' page on its official website, The Observer states its close collaboration with the Shanghai Chunqiu Institute of Development Strategy<sup>2</sup>; one of this institute's guidelines is to serve the public interests of the country and the society (Shanghai Federation of Social Science Associations, n.d.). A glance at The Observer's reports on its official website shows that it closely follows or repeats the Chinese government's statements and policies. Many of its articles are reposted or are derived from the government's mouthpiece news outlets, such as Xinhua News Agency. The Observer is thus a tacit agent of state influence,

albeit one at the sub-state level that is not part of the state leadership (Loh 2021).

This outlet has gained more than seven million followers on Bilibili and ranks amongst the top 100 video uploaders. The demographics of its followers cannot be reliably identified due to the anonymous environment of Bilibili but, according to a report by SocialBeta (2021), the average age of Bilibili users is 21 years. In terms of the gender ratio, male users account for 57% and female users for 43%. The large following attained by The Observer is mainly attributed to its personalised, tabloid-style and sensationalised video uploading practices, as shown by a comparison of the reports on its official website and on its Bilibili channel (Wang 2021).

Bilibili is a leading video-sharing platform in China which features the danmu commenting service and is popular with young Chinese internet users. According to this company's financial results in the second quarter of 2021, the platform hosted 62 million daily active users (Bilibili 2021). The social functionality of danmu comments allows users to interact with each other by posting their opinions and feelings on the screen at specific playback points, which are then displayed along with the video content. This design increases the pleasure that viewers derive from watching videos with companions (Chen *et al.* 2017) and facilitates the community-building on this platform (Wang 2022).

Bilibili enjoys a unique position in the Chinese digital media ecology by serving as a mecca for online youth cultures. Users gain access to trending pop culture, useful information, and the latest updates about films, games, anime, cartoons, fitness, makeup and so on. Many uploaders attract huge followings and expand their fan bases by providing high-quality video content. Users pursue entertainment and relaxation, embrace consumerism, focus on personal thoughts and feelings, and communicate with uploaders and co-viewers via danmu comments (Chen *et al.* 2017; Huang 2020). However, Bilibili users display an apathetic attitude towards politics. As a social media platform, Bilibili is not designed to support the dissemination of serious political debate, and users tend to be uncomfortable consuming hard politics or partisan news (Wang, 2022).

At the time of this study (1 November 2019), 24 videos uploaded to The Observer's Bilibili channel could be traced back to the RT Russia channel on YouTube. In terms of coverage, The Observer revealed its preference to provide Bilibili users with current affairs and tabloid-like news items about Russia. Hence, RT Russia is a good source for this Chinese outlet to collect timely and Russian-language materials about Russia due to RT's affinity with domestic and international affairs related to this country. RT Russia's reportage stance also tends to be closer to that of the Kremlin rather than other RT YouTube channels, which often accommodates the stance of their local broadcasting environments. Hence, the fact that source videos were

collected from RT Russia assists this investigation into the political implications of The Observer's mediation of Russian videos.

### **3. Recontextualisation of news videos**

News writers and translators are always required to consider context (Baker 2006). News is never an impartial and objective mirror of 'reality', but rather a context-bounding product. News content is shaped by several internal and external factors, including institutional policy, the journalists' stances, the preferences of the target audience and other commercial factors, which are manifested in the selection of reported events, linguistic choices, arguments, examples and the overall evaluation and stance towards or judgement of the event (Kadhim and Hijjo 2021).

Straddling the boundaries of news studies and translation studies, the translation of news videos is an activity framed by context, especially the target context where the videos will be consumed. Following Van Doorslaer (2012), translation allows news to be decontextualised and adapted to a new target audience. Scammell (2018: 24) similarly believed that "the need to 'recontextualise' a news story for a domestic audience is a standard feature of foreign reporting," regardless of whether inter-lingual translation is employed. As a process of recontextualisation, news translation may be closely associated with issues pertaining to voice, representation, institutional authority and ideology (Kang 2007). This paper argues that the translators, the translated news texts and all the other stakeholders in the target context are interrelated with each other as "an organic whole" (Merkle 2008: 177). Within it, these actors form a complex set of political, social, cultural and commercial interrelationships which is often balanced but is also evolving.

I therefore use the term recontextualisation to describe the process through which RT videos have been translated, appropriated and repurposed by The Observer for the local media context of Bilibili. When media content is transferred from one platform to another, it is adapted in consideration of the properties of the platforms and their media logics (Welbers and Opgenhaffen 2019). Various translation strategies are identified in the recontextualisation practices of news: overall approaches such as domestication and foreignisation (Scammell 2018); decisions made at the word, phrase or sentence-level including deletion, addition, substitution and reorganisation (Hursti 2001). Since the translated news must be tailored to suit the consumers' needs and expectations, Bielsa and Bassnett (2009) regard domestication as the absolute dominant strategy. Based on these considerations, this study supports the notion that domesticating, localising or adapting the news to the target context constitutes a necessity.

In the process of recontextualising RT videos to Bilibili, The Observer must adapt the ways in which it produces content to the local media context on Bilibili to survive in this fiercely competitive environment and win followers.

An initial scan of the videos on The Observer's channel shows its inclination to embrace the entertainment-oriented context on Bilibili by emphasising the affective and playful dimensions of its content. This indicates that The Observer will make its translated videos capable of fulfilling Bilibili users' entertainment needs, while at the same time, stay in line with its political stance.

## 4. Research design

This study employed a contrastive analysis of 24 pairs of RT-sourced videos to identify the differences in the source and target texts. The aim was to determine The Observer's strategies for the mediation and recontextualisation of Russian audiovisual strategic narratives for Chinese-speaking Bilibili audiences.

### 4.1 Theoretical framework

RT has been widely recognised as a projector of Russia's strategic narratives (Miskimmon *et al.* 2013, 2017). This study then adopts this theory to investigate the changes of political messages encoded in the source videos made by The Observer from one media context to another as a case study in broader issues of news translation. Strategic narrative is defined as "representations of a sequence of events and identities [...] through which political actors [...] attempt to give determined meaning to past, present, and future in order to achieve political objectives" (Miskimmon *et al.* 2013: 7). A coherent and convincing narrative conveys meanings in and evaluations of the international order and the states it portrays, sets constraints on the imaginable and the actionable, and shapes perceived interests. As an instrument of power, political actors seek to use it for purposes from cultivating a particular perception of states and system, building support for policy legitimacy, to creating a favourable discursive environment (Miskimmon *et al.* 2013).

Miskimmon *et al.* further proposed a framework consisting of three closely linked levels of system narratives, identity narratives and issue narratives to facilitate the analysis. In general, system narratives describe the structure of the international system itself, who the actors are, and how the system operates. Identity narratives pertain to the story of a state or nation, its characteristics, and its values and goals, while issue narratives explain what the issue is, and how a particular action will resolve this issue (Miskimmon *et al.* 2013).

Driven by its own considerations about the context on Bilibili and its political stance, The Observer deliberately selects and translates the RT source videos to make them politically empowering on Bilibili. Narratives of Russia's national identity and the world system originally rendered in the source videos can be altered by The Observer in its translated versions to promote and evoke a distinct pattern of Beijing-aligned judgements and

opinions about actors, conditions or events for the target Bilibili audiences. This theory thus benefits the analysis of the political implications of the mediation of The Observer on the source videos, which can be manifested on changes of the issue, identity and system narratives between source and target videos.

## **4.2 Research questions**

This contrastive approach foregrounds the role played by The Observer in mediating the strategic narratives that RT originally encoded in these videos for Bilibili users. My research questions are as follows:

1. What changes has The Observer made to the Russian videos?
2. How does The Observer's translation strategies reflect its efforts to recontextualise the videos for Bilibili and, at the same time, uphold its political stance?
3. Based on the analysis of the changes that The Observer made to the Russian strategic narratives, which main factors that influenced The Observer's recontextualisation of RT videos can be identified?

## **4.3 Research methods**

The 24 pairs of videos have been imported into the software programme MAXQDA, which allows the retrieval and comparison of the source and target videos and marking small units of elements that are different between the two sets of videos. For example, while identifying an audio or visual element that was newly introduced by The Observer, the corresponding segment in a target video clip can be selected and coded according to the coding scheme. This coding scheme was developed inductively in terms of the types of editing techniques that The Observer used in its translation and mediation of Russian strategic narratives. The Observer's editing techniques that were used in the source videos can generally be grouped according to five categories. Below is a brief introduction of the editing techniques that The Observer has employed:

- Selection of video segments: The Observer deliberately selected specific sections from the source videos to create a new narrative. The selected video clips serve as the backbone of The Observer's Chinese narratives as they offer information about the straightforward 'realities' of Russia and the world to Bilibili's audience.
- Rewriting of the titles of videos: The Observer has given appealing titles to the translated videos. Working as teasers, these titles present the most interesting part of the target videos that The Observer deemed important for its translation. The Observer aims to attract the viewers' interest and curiosity, as well as to generate clicks from viewers as a result of the new titles of videos.



- **Addition of subtitles:** Subtitles are mainly the written texts converted from the oral conversations or speeches of protagonists in the videos and superimposed on the lower section of the screen. The ways in which these conversations are translated from Russian to Chinese have an impact on the narratives that The Observer prefers its audience to know. The Observer also provides any necessary background information in the subtitles to enable Bilibili audiences to understand or interpret the videos.
- **Addition of background music:** When watching videos, audiences are guided, often unconsciously, by the background music. The music tracks are closely integrated by The Observer into the narratives conveyed in the translated video clips. They help to set the tune of those re-narrated videos.
- **Addition of pictures:** Based on my inductive observation of the videos, The Observer has inserted pictures into source videos in making its own narratives in a few videos.

These editing techniques are also widely used by user-generated video producers on Bilibili, whose works account for a large proportion of the content that is uploaded to this video-sharing platform. Hence, The Observer provides a user-friendly environment for adapting commonly used editing techniques in its own work. The Observer adopts suitable editing techniques to deliver its own version of RT-sourced videos. These editing techniques, which operate at the tactical level, are thus dynamic units of meaning that construct a particular interpretation of Russia, the Russian people, Putin and the world. Examining the ways in which editing techniques have contributed to the construction of a set of overarching strategic narratives allows me to develop a precise understanding of how the translation of strategic narratives operates in this recontextualisation process. My methodological approach does not aim to delve into the use of each technique, but rather to analyse how the edits contribute to the changes made to the Russian narratives at the issue, identity and system levels in the Bilibili context.

## **5. Results: The Observer's mediation of the Russian strategic narratives**

The data analysis revealed that The Observer consciously adapted the Russian videos to the Bilibili context. The Observer employed the editing techniques listed above creatively in its translations of the RT videos. More than one technique was used in each of the recontextualised videos. The frequencies of the use of these techniques that were observed in the dataset are listed in Table 1 below:

<b>Editing techniques</b>	<b>Frequency of use</b>
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Selection of video segments	20
Rewriting of the titles of videos	24
Addition of subtitles	12
Addition of background music	9
Addition of pictures	4

**Table 1. Frequencies of Editing Techniques Used by The Observer in Its Translation of RT Videos**

The source videos present some of Putin's and the Russian people's activities, such as Putin participating in formal or informal events, and these activities are usually recorded in full. However, The Observer selectively translates only certain parts of long source videos or condenses short videos into shorter ones to hone the preferred narratives for Bilibili audiences. Twenty of the 24 source videos were shortened to less than two minutes. This translation strategy is aligned with the consumption habits of Bilibili users, who are not inclined to watch lengthy videos. An abundance of interesting material is available on the internet for Bilibili users to explore. Short video clips that present Russia's characteristics can easily capture and retain their short attention span. The Observer also gave appealing titles to these target videos, thus reflecting the changes in the dominant meanings from the source videos in the target ones. More importantly, these titles present the most interesting part of the audiovisual narrative, as the focus is on the thematic, figurative story elements that The Observer deems important for the recontextualisation.

Of note, approximately two thirds of the 'raw materials' that The Observer collected from RT Russia (15 clips) reported on Putin's various activities as the head of Russia on the international diplomatic and domestic stages. The remaining third of the source videos (nine clips) presented news items in relation to Russia and the Russian people. The Observer's strategy of foregrounding Putin as the protagonist in many of its translated videos also matches the Bilibili users' consumption habits. On Bilibili, it is common for fans or vidders to rework popular culture from existing films, TV series or cartoons, and "construct garments and props based on beloved characters, or recombine digital content ripped from films and television shows" (Navas and Gallagher 2017: 136) to produce their own favourite stories.

It is logical for The Observer to allocate a high percentage of news coverage to a political celebrity and cultural icon such as Putin (Goscilo 2013) in the translated videos as this will attract audiences due to his high-profile status. The fact that many source videos feature Putin, which reflects the Kremlin's intention to promote Russian strategic narratives through the vehicle of this well-known public figure, restricts The Observer's scope of coverage. In a broader context, this strategy also reflects the global media and political phenomenon of 'personalisation' which has been "a defining trend of contemporary political communication" in the past few decades (Holtz-Bacha *et al.* 2014: 153). Personalisation refers to "the notion that individual

political actors have become more prominent at the expense of parties and collective identities” (Karvonen 2009: 4).

In addition, the videos that were analysed here focused squarely on brief, tabloid-style news items in relation to Putin, Russia and the Russian people, such as a failed test of the Russian post office’s drone delivery. None of these trivial news items touch on anything that may relate indirectly to an issue in the Russian narrative. No complete and overarching issue narratives can be found in the data. Hence, the differences between the strategic narratives in the two sets of videos are discussed only on the levels of identity and system narratives.

## **5.1 Putin-featured videos**

Putin and the Kremlin have carefully constructed his public image, which is disseminated through various channels, including Russian state-controlled broadcasters and YouTube channels that mainly target Russian-speaking audiences, both domestically and abroad (Sperling 2016). This creation of affection for or even adoration of Putin among Russian-speaking people consolidates his support base and authority in Russia because their collective emotional attachment to Putin could offer psychological reassurance about Russia’s stability and unity in a world that is full of uncertainties (Cassiday and Johnson 2010). The Observer has extracted the most ‘symbolic’ elements pertaining to Putin from the source videos for Bilibili audiences. Commercially, by foregrounding Putin in its target videos, The Observer can attract more audiences due to Putin’s high media visibility. Politically, this strategy allows The Observer to indirectly promote Chinese strategic narratives through the vehicle of Putin.

### **5.1.1 Humanising Putin**

One noticeable strategy that The Observer has deployed in translating videos in relation to Putin is to humanise the Russian head of state. As part of the global trend of ‘personalisation’, there has been a clear move towards the portrayal of the ‘human’ side of politicians in recent decades (Langer 2007). Political leaders start drawing their authority by being ordinary and relatable. People tend to perceive such a figure as the embodiment of trustworthiness and responsive leadership (Barisione 2009). The Kremlin has also consistently tried to portray Putin as a man of the people. Official Russian narratives stress his humble origins in a communal flat, an experience shared by many Russians (Beale 2018). Putin himself also frequently uses a folksy style of speaking to relate with ordinary Russian (Beale 2018).

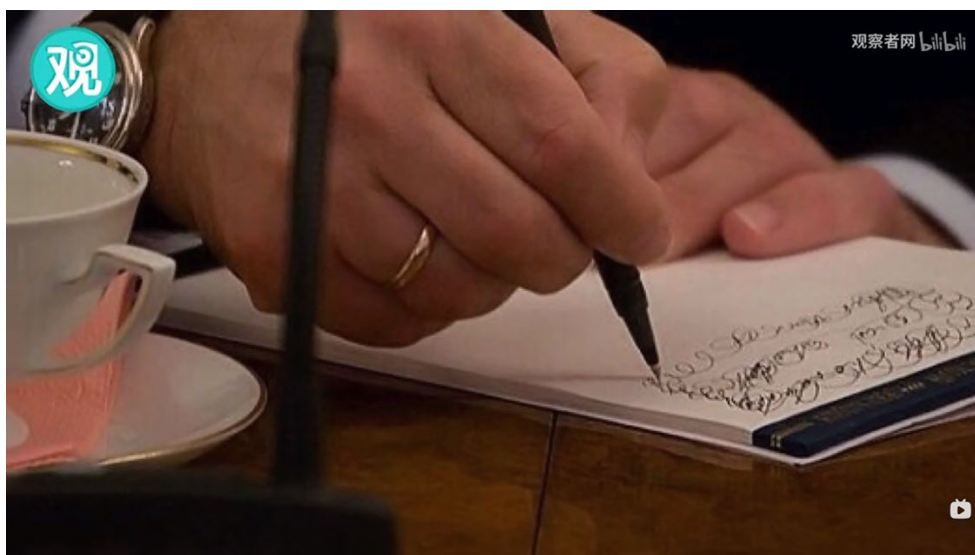
The intense competition for audience has led to the growth of personalised trivial news in The Observer’s translated videos. “Putin Couldn’t Read His Notes Again, Frozen for 20 Seconds...”<sup>3</sup> is a prime example of such a translation strategy, which was presented in an amusing way. This

translated video starts with an awkwardly long silence depicting Putin in attendance at a conference. The Observer narrates the situation by adding numbers in forms of subtitles, from one to 20 to represent the 20-second time span (Figure 1). Viewers' attention is easily drawn to the elapse of time shown by the numbers added to the screen, making it clear that Putin has stopped speaking for an unusually long time.



**Figure 1. Screenshot<sup>4</sup> from "Putin Couldn't Read His Notes Again, Frozen for 20 Seconds..."**

As the tension builds, Putin breaks it by honestly acknowledging that 我的字迹看起来像鸡爪 'my handwriting looks like chicken scratches; мой почерк похож на куриные царапины' which prompts a burst of laughter from the other attendees. The phrase the 'handwriting looks like chicken scratches' is used regularly in both Russian and Chinese cultural contexts in equal measure, such as scenarios in which teachers criticise pupils for having poor handwriting. The Observer has selected this video segment as it can resonate with the Bilibili audiences, most of whom are high school or college students. The Observer also adds two still images collected from elsewhere to the source video to validate Putin's judgement on his own handwriting (Figure 2). Such imaginative addition is intended to spur another round of laughter among Bilibili audiences.



**Figure 2. Screenshot from “Putin Couldn’t Read His Notes Again, Frozen for 20 Seconds...”**

This source video illustrates that RT has already become responsive to the entertainment-oriented context on YouTube by introducing personalised tabloid-like news to its YouTube audience. However, The Observer makes this video funnier and does not treat Putin as respectfully as RT does. Playing down the respective and authoritative aspects of the source video benefits The Observer commercially by entertaining its Bilibili audiences. Although Putin’s authority is downplayed to some extent, his image portrayed in the translated videos does not, in principle, contradict the Kremlin’s preferred image of him, whilst at the same time reinforcing his charisma. The Observer makes the Russian president appear to be less like a formal leader who remains distant from the people, and more like an ordinary, fallible person. This translation strategy fosters an interpersonal relationship between Putin and the viewers and constructs a sense of familiarity with Putin, thereby increasing the acceptability of the Chinese and Russian narratives that Putin espouses.

### 5.1.2 Emphasising Putin’s assertiveness to the West

Putin’s assertive diplomatic lines when dealing with disputes with Western countries are emphasised by The Observer in the translated videos. Such strategy is mostly realised through selecting particular segments from the source videos to repost. A prime example is that The Observer extracted a 1-minute, 37-second segment titled “Putin Responds to the Poisoning of the ‘Double Agent’: If It Had Been a Chemical Weapon, He Would Have Died at the Site” from a 12-minute, 11-second RT video titled “Vladimir Putin’s Speech at the Campaign Headquarters.” The source video records a full brief press conference held straight after Putin’s successful election to Russian presidency in 2018. The Observer only selects the conversation between Putin and a journalist from the source video regarding the poisoning of UK-Russian double-agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter<sup>5</sup>.

The Observer foregrounds Putin's strictly structured comment about this event, which has been translated as follows:

*Если бы это было боевое отравляющее вещество, люди, конечно, погибли бы на месте.*

[If it had been a military poisoning agent, people, of course, would die on the spot.]

*如果真是战争用的化学毒剂[,] 那个人[,] 毫无疑问[,] 肯定当场死了。*

[If it had been a military poisoning agent, that person, of course, would die on the spot.]

The Observer translated the original Russian word *люди* 'people' as *那个人* 'that person', referring to Skripal, thereby narrowing Putin's general statement to a specific and forceful one. The Observer then translated another of Putin's statement as follows:

*Мы все наше химическое оружие уничтожили под контролем международных наблюдателей, причем сделали это первыми в отличие от некоторых наших партнеров, которые обещали это сделать, но своих обязательств до сих пор, к сожалению, не сдержали.*

[We have destroyed all chemical weapons under international supervision, and we were one of the first to do it, unlike some of our partners who have promised to do so but unfortunately have yet to honour their commitments thus far.]

*在国际监督下[,] 我们已经销毁了所有化学武器[,] 而且我们是第一批这么做的[,] 不像某些国家承诺了要销毁但直到今天还没能兑现自己的诺言。*

[Under international supervision, we have destroyed all chemical weapons, and we were one of the first to do it, unlike certain countries who have promised to do so but have yet to honour their commitments until today.]

Here, Putin is referring implicitly to the US. The Observer translated *в отличие от некоторых наших партнеров* 'unlike some of our partners' into *不像某些国家* 'unlike certain countries' in its subtitles, making Putin's implication more ironic and assertive. Lastly, Putin said that Russia is prepared to cooperate with the other party to investigate this event, whereas they seem reluctant to work together, and concluded by saying

*Любой здравомыслящий человек понимает, что это полная чушь, бред, нонсенс.*

[Any sane person understands that this is complete rubbish, drivel, nonsense.]

*所有心智健全的人都明白这完全是无稽之谈[,] 一派胡言[,] 毫无意义。*

[Any sane person understands that this is complete groundless, drivel, nonsense.]

His strong word choice in refuting the UK's charge externalises the pent-up resentment Chinese people feel towards Western hegemonic behaviours, thereby generating clicks (89,000) for this video.

An essential part of the education that most Bilibili users have received in terms of Chinese history is the 'one hundred years of humiliation' from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s when China was oppressed and torn asunder by imperialists. Putin's strident criticism also demonstrates that the system narrative promoted by Beijing, namely that US-led Western hegemony is being challenged by China and Russia as part of a move towards a multipolar world, is included in the translated videos. His words help to legitimate the diplomatic language of Chinese officials who have grown more assertive in recent years on account of China's relative material strength. Juxtaposed with Putin's hard lines, those of the Chinese gain credit and justification among Chinese audiences.

In general, in combination with portraying Putin as a likeable political figure through humanising him and introducing entertaining elements into the target videos, Beijing's preferred system, such as a multipolar world, is included in the translated videos and expressed through the political leader of Russia's direct speech. The Observer's appropriation of the Russian source videos offers an alternative language for promoting Beijing's narratives.

## **5.2 Changes on the level of identity narrative**

Variations in the presentation of the Russian national identity can be identified in several videos. For example, there is no music in the source video titled "Let's Run Away!: The Crash of the First Drone of the 'Russian Post'." The Observer added two different music styles to its translated version titled "Russian Post Office's First Drone Delivery Crashes Soon after It Takes Off" to trigger an emotional response from the audience. The first half of this video shows a group of Russian people gathering together to test their delivery drone as it takes off into the air on its maiden flight. The music selected for this part by The Observer is a happy tune. Suddenly, the drone falls from the air, hits a building, and falls sadly to the ground in pieces. The music switches quickly to a sorrowful stringed-instrument piece. Through the musical styling, viewers are amused by this accident while given a sad sense of Russia's underdevelopment in terms of technology.

In contrast, the Chinese government has been consistently calling to build China into a science and technology giant, an essential step to realising the Chinese Dream — a core Chinese identity narrative (Wang 2014). China's high-tech is globally leading in some areas. For example, Shenzhen DJI Sciences and Technologies Ltd is the dominant market leader in the civilian drone sector and has accounted for 80% of the world's consumer market as of 2020 (Daxue Consulting 2022). The Observer appears to use the translated RT videos to project a narrative of Russian national identity,



suggesting that Russia lags far behind China in the technology sector, thereby implicitly promoting Beijing's own identity narrative.

Another negative change in the narrative about Russia's identity that is projected in the target videos can also be seen the video titled "Shooting in Dagestan, Russia, Five Deaths and Four Injuries", which was translated from the Russian video titled "Surveillance Cameras Filmed a Criminal Who Started Shooting in Kizlyar." This time, the change is primarily realised through The Observer's subtitles and the Chinese audiences' lack of geographical knowledge about Russia. The source video is just a short CCTV surveillance recording, in which a woman speeds up her walk on a street because of approaching danger, a man holding a rifle while following her down the street. The Observer only superimposes subtitles at its translated video, explaining that this crime happened on 18 February local time in Dagestan, Russia; a 22-year-old shot into a crowd near a church, resulting in five deaths and four injuries. The heavy toll of this attack is stressed in blue (Figure 3). Without knowing that this place is located on the Chechen Republic border, the Bilibili audience is unable to relate to Russia's official version of the 'war on terror' narrative and Russia's identity as a global fighter against terrorism promoted by the Kremlin. For many Russian-speaking audiences on YouTube, this is not new. By releasing this video, Russia can justify its involvement in Chechnya through demonstrating its anti-terrorism policy.



**Figure 3. Screenshot from "Shooting in Dagestan, Russia, Five Deaths and Four Injuries." English translation of the Chinese subtitles: 22-year-old man shoots into the crowd near a church, killing five and injuring four.**

In the translated video, The Observer adds sorrowful background music to it, intensifying the sense of danger and encouraging emotional investment from Chinese audiences. The shooting tragedy can arouse Chinese viewers' empathy for the Russian victims, at the same time revealing the fact that Russia is less safe than China, where guns are strictly banned. The Observer, therefore, implicitly praises the Chinese government's success in



performing any government's primary duty, namely ensuring physical security of the people. Thanks to the seemingly sensational topic, the edited video generated four thousand views.

The above examples demonstrate that The Observer takes various considerations into its recontextualisation of RT videos to Bilibili. Chinese audiences' pre-existing stereotypes of Russia and China, The Observer's propagandist mission, and the audiences' entertainment needs are all valued in its translation practice.

### 5.3 Changes on the level of system narrative

Russia and China share similar views in terms of a preferred international system, both expecting a transition from a unipolar to a multipolar world. However, different views about the regional order of Central Asia held by China and Russia can be traced in the contrastive analysis. For example, RT presents the meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the CIS in a video titled "Putin commented on doping scandal and WADA hack" for its YouTube audiences. Putin's compliment to the President of Kyrgyzstan for successfully hosting the World Nomad Games shows that these countries are ethnically involved together. The Observer separates this part from the source video and only reuses Putin's comments about the hackers' revelations in its translated version titled "Hackers Exposed Doping Use among European and American Athletes. This Classmate Please Manage Your Facial Expressions." This decision illustrates The Observer's reluctance to showcase Russia's strong influence in Central Asia.

Moscow has retained extensive political, economic and security ties with Central Asia after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. To be closely connected with CIS countries is highly valued by Russia for security and economic purposes (Weitz 2008). However, in recent decades, China is beginning to look westward by pushing the Silk Road project and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. China and Russia compete, to some extent, in Central Asia. The Observer's selective repost draws Bilibili audiences' attention to the fact that Russia has been banned by WADA from taking parts in the Olympic Games. The translated video shows The Observer's preference to establish Putin as the protagonist of videos, and to promote China's disagreement against a Western-dominated unipolar world.

In the translated video, The Observer adds a picture of the hackers' statement about breaking into WADA's database at the beginning of the video. Two subtitles are included above this statement (Figure 4) to explain that the 奇幻熊 'Fancy Bears' hack team has thrown several information bombs in a row, thus revealing that a large number of European and American athletes had taken illegal doping substances. The words 重磅炸弹 'bombing information', 欧美的 'European and American' and 合法的 'legally'

are highlighted in blue. This translation strategy encourages viewers to believe that the West itself breaks the rules without being punished.



**Figure 4. Screenshots from “Hackers Exposed Doping Use among European and American Athletes. This Classmate Please Manage Your Facial Expressions.” English translation of the Chinese subtitles: Hacker team ‘Fancy Bears’ dropped a bombshell by revealing that a large number of European and America had been taking banned substances.**

The Observer further increases Chinese viewers’ excitement about the revelation that goes against the West in its translation of Putin’s words. One of his sentences has been translated as follows:

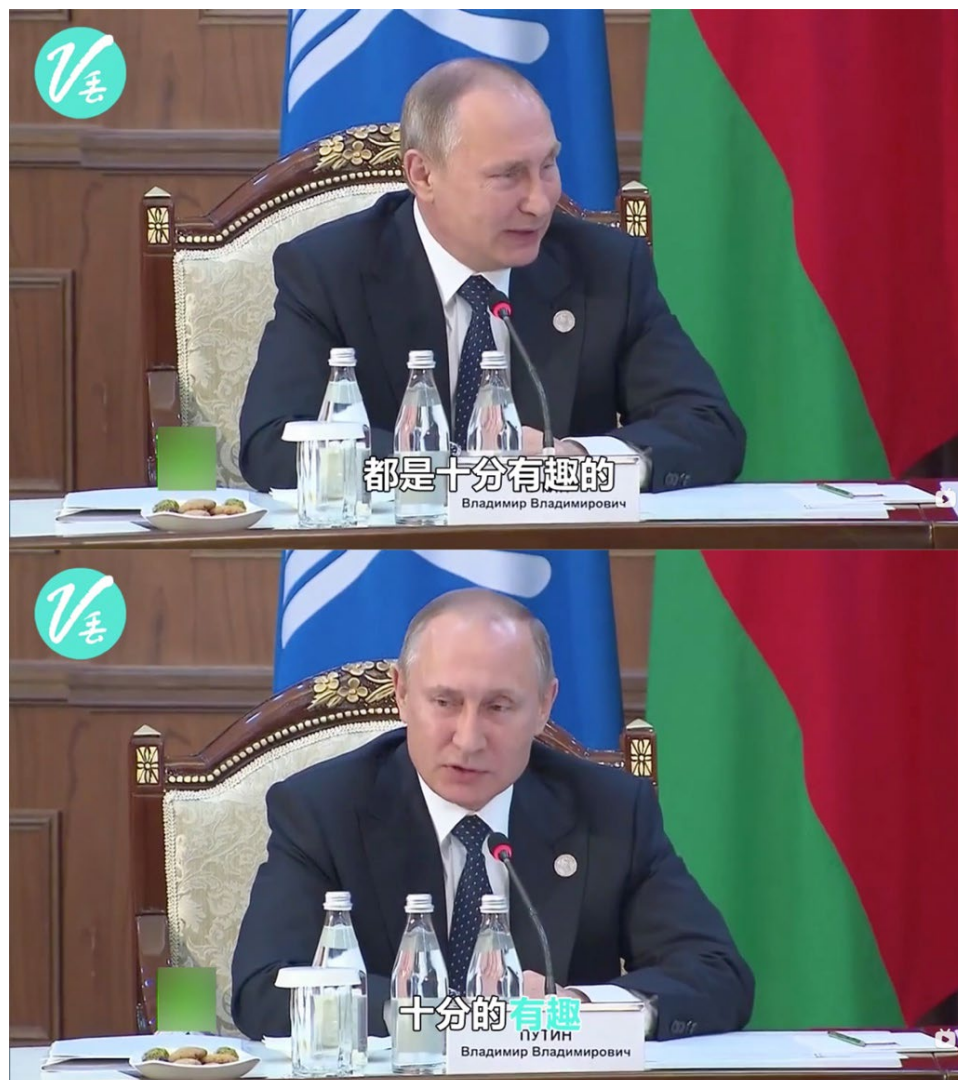
*То, что они сделали, не может не быть интересным для международной общественности, прежде всего спортивной общественности.*

[What they have done cannot but be interesting to the international community, especially the sports community.]

*但是他们的发现 [,] 对于国际社会来说 [,] 都是十分有趣的 [,] 十分的有趣 [,] 特别是在体育领域.*

[But their discovery is very interesting, very interesting, to the international community, particularly the sports community.]

In the Chinese subtitles, 'very interesting' is repeated twice with the aim of stirring up the Chinese audience's feelings (Figure 5).



**Figure 5. Screenshot from "Hackers Exposed Doping Use among European and American Athletes. This Classmate Please Manage Your Facial Expressions." English translation of the Chinese subtitles: Very interesting, very interesting.**

This video perfectly illustrates how a Russian system narrative contested with a Chinese one while recontextualising RT videos to Bilibili. Russia's influence in Central Asia has been concealed from the translated videos for Bilibili audience. The selectively reused video segments, however, skilfully promote a multipolar system narrative preferred both by China and Russia as conveyed in the assertive lines of Putin.

## 6. Concluding remarks

The data analysis showed that The Observer has significantly altered the videos obtained from RT, and it has used several approaches (e.g., video segment selection) to translate them so as to serve its own commercial and political agendas. This clearly indicates this Chinese media agent's understanding of the local media ecology on Bilibili. Putin has been used as the selling point in the translated videos for commercial purposes, thus indicating his 'box office appeal' in China. To cater to Bilibili users' consumption habits, The Observer has increased Putin's visibility and has highlighted his 'everyman' aspects in the translated videos. A high proportion of entertainment elements is also introduced in the translated videos to capture the attention of the Bilibili users who demonstrate low engagement in political topics. Bilibili users find humorous presentations of strategic narratives to be more accessible and friendlier than political-laden news. The Observer weaponises laughter to diminish the political dimension of its audiovisual narratives, which in fact is an expressive practice with political significance.

By adopting appropriate editing techniques for the RT videos, The Observer has changed Russia's strategic narratives about its national identity and the world system, thereby illustrating the ways in which this Beijing-aligned video uploader promotes Chinese strategic narratives on Bilibili. Some Russian strategic narratives are deemed less newsworthy (e.g., Russia's leadership in Central Asia) than others, such as those endorsing the anti-Western sentiments expressed by Putin. In its mediation process, The Observer has taken the Bilibili audiences' pre-existing knowledge of China, Russia and the world into account, which shapes the company's approach to translation and political communication. The Observer builds and increases its fan base by constantly providing tabloid-style, personalised and sensationalised international news on Bilibili. Disguised as 'user-generated content', the Chinese narratives encoded in these edited videos circulate widely on Bilibili.

The Observer's editing of Russian videos and the political messages encoded in them demonstrate that recontextualising news videos from one platform to another requires careful consideration of the target audiences' consumption habits, pre-existing knowledge and diverse viewing needs. However, it is important to highlight that identifying the factors that influence recontextualisation can be speculative in a study with tight focus on the analysis of media artefacts. Thus, future researchers could investigate reception-oriented or process-oriented recontextualisation practices. Moreover, The Observer's recontextualisation of the RT-sourced videos only represents a strand of news videos recirculated in a specific entertainment-oriented media environment, within the broad phenomenon of reusing videos across platforms in the digital world. Scholars may be interested in exploring the translation practices of other video genres, among different online communities. In addition, The Observer's translation practices, such as taking the audiences' consumption habits into consideration, are not typical but nor are they rare; and this approach can

be widely analysed in videos on other platforms beyond Bilibili, and outside of China.

## Acknowledgements

My heartfelt thanks go to Stephen Hutchings, Vera Tolz, Mona Baker and Luis Pérez-González for their support and patience throughout the stages of this work. I would also like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback.

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## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available at <https://github.com/RuiWangUOM/Chinese-Social-Media-Platform-Recontextualises-Russian-Strategic-Narratives>.

## Biography

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Observer is my English translation of the Chinese media outlet “观察网.”

<sup>2</sup> Shanghai Chunqiu Institute of Development Strategy is my English translation of “上海春秋发展战略研究院.”

<sup>3</sup> All the titles of the videos that are included in the data analysis in this paper are my English translations of the original titles in Chinese or Russian. The links to these videos are listed in the dataset, which can be found in the data availability statement.

<sup>4</sup> All the screenshots that are included in this paper have been reproduced with the kind permission of The Observer.

<sup>5</sup> Sergei Viktorovich Skripal was a former Russian military intelligence officer who acted as a double agent for the UK’s intelligence services during the 1990s and early 2000s. He was arrested by the Russian Federal Security Service and sentenced to 13 years in prison. He then settled in the UK in 2010. In 2018, he and his daughter were poisoned in Salisbury.